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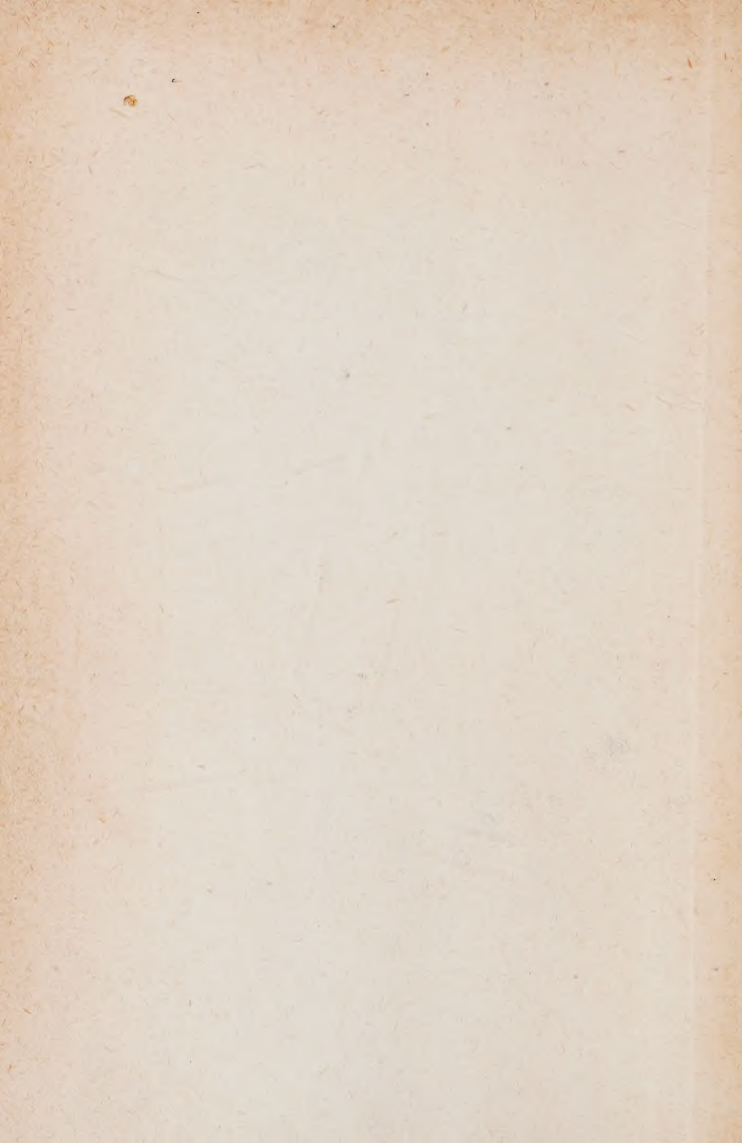
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FIRST MAKERS OF ENGLAND



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JULIUS CÆSAR.

(From the Bust in Berlin.)

[Frontispiece]

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring stylized leaves and flowers. The top and sides are composed of a repeating pattern of leaves and small flowers. The bottom features larger, more detailed floral motifs, including what appear to be pansies or similar flowers.

FIRST MAKERS OF ENGLAND

JULIUS CÆSAR KING ARTHUR
ALFRED THE GREAT

BY
LADY MAGNUS
AUTHOR OF "BOYS OF THE BIBLE," ETC.

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE ST.

1901

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TO ALL POTENTIAL HEROES, AND
TO MY OWN ESPECIAL ONE,
THIS BOOK OF HEROES
IS INSCRIBED

P R E F A C E

WELFARE is founded on character, and the seeds of our national character are to be sought in the lives of the heroes of early England, from whom we trace the beginnings of our best habits and institutions. Roman laws and Roman roads, the ideal of honour which the Round Table typified, Alfred's navy, and Alfred's learning—these are as much a part of English history as all the accurately dated events which have occurred since the Norman Conquest. Schoolmasters and their counsellors have come to reckon with this view in devising their methods for the teaching of history. Professor Withers, for example, in his recommendations to the School Board, draws attention to the value as moral teaching

of the study of those early times by the children in the schools. For these, then, and for the children at home, the following stories have been written. There is only no moral at the end, because the moral of the first makers of England should be abundantly manifest in their record and example.

KATIE MAGNUS.

August 1901.

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PART I
JULIUS CÆSAR

INTRODUCTORY

ONCE UPON A TIME

IN this busy, crowded England of ours, there were once no houses, no streets, no roads even. The mists lay on the lonely hills and valleys, and marsh mallows gleamed and will-o'-the-wisps flitted where nowadays the corn grows, or the street lamps shine. What are highways for men were then but faint sheep tracks. The sea, indeed, looked the same—"the unplumb'd salt estranging sea,"—its waves rippled round our beautiful bays, or tossed its spray high up on our white cliffs just as they do to-day, but only canoes and broad-bottomed boats made a path, and short paths they were, in the mighty waters. There were no ships on the sea and there were no roads in the land.

Now in this little book you will read some

of the stories and legends that have come down to us concerning the people who lived in this England of ours in those strange, far-off times, and so you will learn how the roads came to be made, and the ships came to be built. And best of all, you will learn what it was which got these and many another great and good thing done. And if you come to understand this, then I think you will know, with a glad thrill of responsibility, that the same spirit that was in these first natives of Great Britain is in us, their heirs, and that it is this spirit which has made and which keeps our country of "use and name and fame."



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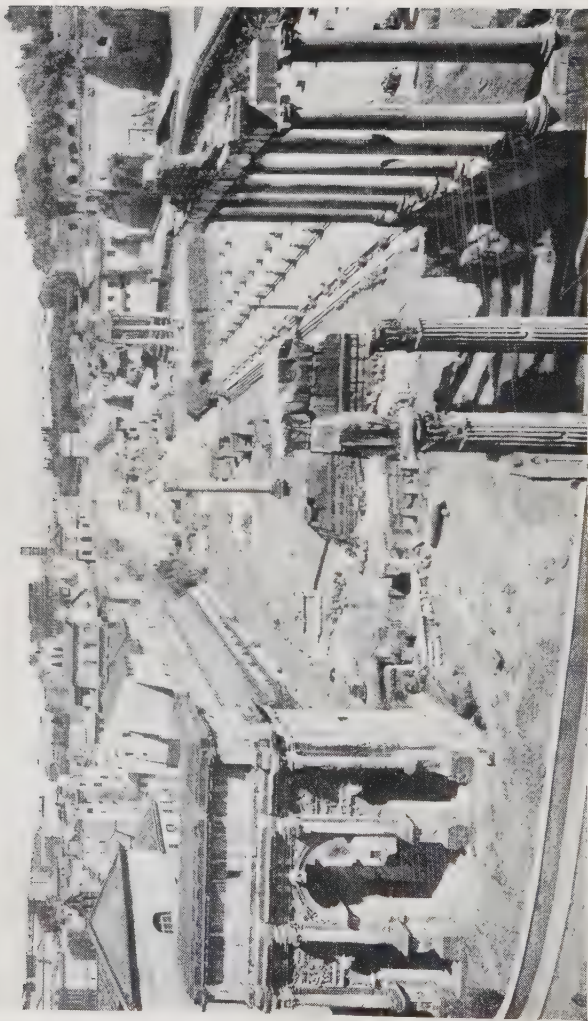
CHAPTER I

JULIUS CÆSAR

Two thousand years ago, that is a hundred years before the birth of Christ, Julius Cæsar, who invaded Britain, was born in Rome. Rome, which is to-day just the capital of the country of Italy, and of chief interest for its ruins, stood then, giving its name to the mighty Roman Empire. It had begun as a little walled town on seven hills, by the river Tiber, but it had come by conquest, and by self-conquest, to hold sway over all the peoples living in those days round the Mediterranean Sea. Not only the inhabitants of Italy and Spain and Greece, and what is now the south of France—not only all these, but the people too in some parts of Asia and of Africa were subjects and citizens of Rome. Such a great empire had naturally

some of the troubles and perils, as well as the pride and pleasure, of so wide a dominion, and when Julius Cæsar was a boy the troubles seemed uppermost. A man who should be able to lead men and unite them, to deserve the trust of his fellows, and to inspire their obedience, a man at once "great in council and great in war," was very much needed. The Roman form of Government was a republic, and the Roman system aimed to prove, and to a great extent did prove, that a man may occupy himself with national concerns and may rise to high position in the State, but should yet never rise — never need rise—above taking a personal interest in the well-being of his town. However high in public office, he was expected to understand and to help in the work of municipal life—in all that goes to make a city healthy, well - lighted, well - fed, and well - served. Poor people in towns, it was wisely thought, are too indifferent and sometimes too ignorant for this sort of work, and middle-class people are too busy. It needed men with brains and with leisure to be at one and the same time patriotic





THE FORUM.

and parochial, to administer the little laws, and to vote on the big ones. The Romans set us a very good example in this direction of not neglecting the near for the far. And another great point in their system was, that no one, by mere right of birth, could claim any responsible post or even be a candidate for one. The highest offices were open equally to every Roman citizen, except only to the untrained and the undeserving. The Roman rule was to work your way up, and in the senate, or in the army, or in what we should nowadays call municipal office, the ladder had to be mounted from the very lowest step. Julius Cæsar's family was of the most ancient and most noble in Rome; it reckoned by tradition gods and goddesses among its ancestry, and counted, by undoubted fact, great men and good women all along its line of descent. Yet Julius, like every other young soldier or citizen, had to serve a very thorough apprenticeship before he was accepted as fit to lead in the field or in the forum. And however good a system may be in the planning, it is undoubtedly all the better

for being carried out by the best people, and Julius Cæsar got his training from the very best. A fashion of that day among the nobles was to let their children receive a part of their teaching from the well-born captives of war, who were glad to find so honourable an employment, and who were able to train the young Romans under their charge in feelings of respect for the foreign subjects of the Empire. Cæsar's tutor was one Gniphō, a native of Gaul, who brought a strong influence to bear on his pupil, and gave him a wider knowledge of the country and people which he was afterwards to conquer, and a large way of looking at things in general. Military tactics Julius Cæsar learnt from one of the greatest of the soldiers of Rome, the general Marius, who had married Julius Cæsar's aunt Julia. This great commander was a familiar hero to the boy from his cradle. Cæsar's tastes always inclined to a military career, but his talents were of so all-round a sort that he trained himself also to be a good orator and advocate, and in these studies he had Cicero for a model and a master. In his citizen apprenticeship, he

learnt enough and practised enough of civic duties to have proved a most useful county councillor and magistrate of to-day! He was always learning from good men and good books, and when his time came for teaching, he never ceased teaching himself as well as other people extra lessons of duty and self-restraint. But best of all, Cæsar had in his mother, Aurelia, not only a most loving but a wise companion and friend. Plutarch tells us that Aurelia was a "discreet" woman; and many an instance of this modest-sounding virtue can we discover in her son's bringing up, and many a pleasant little sign too of the love which existed between mother and son, a love which, with discretion at its root, bore flower to the end. When Cæsar was forty years old, and married, he was a candidate for a certain office with a high-sounding name (Pontifex Maximus), and on the morning of his election we read that he stopped on the way to be kissed by his mother and wished good luck. One is pleased to know that he was elected. Such work in Rome helped him to do like work in other ways. He con-

quered Gaul, the France of to-day, and for ten years lived there as governor-general; and it was whilst Cæsar governed Gaul that he looked across the sea at the white unknown cliffs, which gleamed in the sunshine or hid themselves in mist, and the idea came to him of venturing on that "sea forlorn" and invading Britain.

responsibility, the sense of a debt in return for benefits received.

republic, a country governed by men elected by the people, and not reigning by right of birth. France and the United States are modern republics.

municipal, connected with the management of the affairs of a city.

parochial, connected with the affairs of a parish or small community.

senate, parliament of wise men.

forum, the market-place in Rome, where public meetings were held.

advocate, a man who pleaded in the law-courts.

CHAPTER II

JULIUS CÆSAR IN BRITAIN

NOW though the rule of Rome in Cæsar's time rested and relied on military force, Cæsar's ideal of government was not force, and not military. He loved order and peace, and though he loved power, and personal power, yet he loved it only as a means to an end, seeing the end to be impossible without the means. Cæsar was "ambitious," as you may by-and-bye read that Oliver Cromwell was "ambitious," but such ambition in both men was desire for the good and the bettering of the State, and not desire for his own good or for his own advancement. Shakespeare, who knew everything, knew the difference between these two kinds of "ambition," and when Cæsar had been murdered, and Brutus, his false friend, had tried to persuade the

populace that death was the just penalty of Cæsar's ambition, Mark Antony defended Cæsar's memory against that charge: "The noble Brutus hath told you Cæsar was ambitious," he begins, and Shakespeare has written out for us all that beautiful clever speech which—

"put a tongue

In every wound of Cæsar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny." *

It at last made Antony's hearers long to "burn the house of Brutus," and gave them for the rest of their lives a clearer idea as to "ambition." Of a truth in the days of the Cæsars a one-man rule had come to be necessary for Rome, just as it came to be for England in the days of the Stuarts; and half a century before the Christian era, as sixteen centuries after it, the one man had to be strong. East, west, north, and south, on both sides of the Rhine, whilst Julius Cæsar governed in Gaul, the Gallic tribes were being steadily turned into Roman subjects. Of necessity in the process there was

* Act iii., Scene 2, of *Julius Cæsar*.

pretty constant fighting. And Cæsar knew that in those islands, whose white cliffs showed across the narrow, dividing sea, many of the foes he had to fight sought refuge and found support. He knew too that some amount of unauthorised trading went on between the islands and the Continent. Metals from the mines of the natives, and skins and furs from the animals they hunted, found their way into Gaul, and Kentish oysters were by no means unknown delicacies on Roman dinner tables. More than once Cæsar sent an envoy to Britain, but beyond a more or less friendly message in return, he seemed to get no real information concerning the ways or the wants of these unknown islanders. So in the summer of the year 54 B.C., Cæsar determined that he would cross the Channel and go and see it all for himself. It was not conquest he was thinking of so much as of the opportunity for wider knowledge, and perhaps for wider helpfulness. For Cæsar was a wise man as well as a great soldier, and a lover of men as well as a commander of them. He knew that Rome, in the arts of peace no less than in

the arts of war, was in the very front rank of the nations at that date, and he wanted to bring these good things to Britain. So, leaving his conquered province to the care of wisely chosen governors, in the first dawn of a midsummer night in August, Cæsar set sail on his new adventure. He embarked from somewhere near the Calais of to-day with a fleet of eighty vessels for he took with him two of his famous legions of fighting men, and on the evening of that same 26th August, 54 years B.C., the foremost of the Roman ships lay close under those long-seen white cliffs of Dover. And there, on the top of the cliffs, were scores of islanders with long and pointed swords and small bucklers, standing ready to hurl down bits from the cliffs on the strangers. And on the beach, more of them were hurrying up in their war chariots, which had scythes fixed in the axles; and their coracles, or flat-bottomed boats, were manned and ready to put off from the shore. Altogether it was not a hopeful reception, and as Cæsar's ships could not come in close because of the shallows, it almost seemed at first as if no land-

ing were possible, and that there was nothing to be done but to go back again. But the Romans were equal to the occasion. The standard-bearer of the tenth legion jumped into the water and held his flag up high, swimming with the other hand and crying out "Come, follow the flag, fellow-soldiers, I at least will do my duty to the Republic and my general." And the men cheered and followed him, each ship's company swimming or wading or scrambling ashore. The Britons were brave enough themselves to appreciate such readiness and daring, and there was no fighting just then, but instead, envoys went backward and forward, and presently submission was made to the invaders. But with the landing Cæsar's difficulties were by no means over. That night, a gale sprang up in the Channel and much damage was done to the ships that were already drawn up on the beach, and more to those slower ones which had not yet arrived. So before any sort of occupation of the country could be made Cæsar had to make sure of a means of retreat. He got his handy men to



work at once, and soldiers and sailors set to work at repairing the ships and at getting in supplies from the August sheaves of corn which stood stacked in the fields, whilst Cæsar himself went hither and thither, in his wise and considerate way, making some acquaintance with the beautiful country, and with the wild, shy, generous-hearted inhabitants. It was but a slight acquaintance, for this first visit of Cæsar to Britain lasted only three weeks. But the next year he came again, and then he made a real beginning at Roman conquest and Roman civilisation in Britain.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE ROMANS FOUND, AND WHAT THEY LEFT, IN BRITAIN

IN everything but one, there is the widest possible difference between our England of to-day and that early England which the Romans helped to make. The climate seems to have changed very little indeed! For we read of "continuous rain" on that first midsummer visit, and we find Cæsar making a note, "when it is fine, there is fog." So we may conclude that the beautiful blue haze rose on the hills and lingered among the leaves of the trees much as it does now. And this is certain, that neither Cæsar nor those Romans who, with a hundred years' interval, came after him, and on their second coming stayed, neither he nor they remained content with admiring the haze, or even with grumb-

ling at it under the name of mist or fog. Through the dim forests and over the grey hills the Romans made a way. They mapped out the country into five big divisions, and then these clever Romans who lived for four centuries in Britain, made long, straight, excellent roads from one end of the island to the other—a broad safe track for war purposes or for peace purposes, for soldiers or for traders to travel. And there were by-roads and branch roads besides. Along the chief or military roads, at distances of a day's march which would be about twenty miles the one from the other, the Romans made encampments. Their two chief forts stood where London and York are now, and these two camps were the Roman capitals. By slow degrees all the Roman camps grew into English towns. There is many a place in these days which keeps in its name a trace of its Roman beginning. To people who understand the meaning of words, there is many an English word in our grown-up language which shows quite clearly its Latin birth. So we see that besides their roads these first makers of England

have left us signs of their coming in our language. And often beautiful bits of pottery, and ancient coins, and iron implements, are turned up by the plough in country fields, all of which belong to the far-off days, when the Romans, in their stately villas, lived as conquering friends in our England.

And yet larger signs and yet more important memories of the great people are to be found in our laws. Every English lawyer, even in these days, has to learn all about Roman law. And perhaps it is not very fanciful to think that our national character also owes something to the Romans. Cæsar's was such a splendid nature that he cannot have failed to impress himself on the natives even in the short while that he was in Britain. It was a very short while, only three weeks on that first visit, and six months the second time, but we can see that Cæsar gave those brave barbarian ancestors of ours their very first glimpse into the Beyond, into what lay outside of the little island which they were so keen to keep and so ready to defend. And though they were barbarians, the Britons, at

the time of Cæsar's coming, were not barbarian. They cared for what was good, and for what was worthy so far as they knew it, and they were very ready and eager to know more. They were heathens, of course, but then there are different sorts of heathens, and the Britons were not of the savage and bloodthirsty kind. They had no knowledge of God as we have, through the Bible, but they did try to know Him through His works. Almost every big or beautiful or wonderful object—a high hill, a bubbling well—was a sort of separate god to them, a something to think about and to give thanks for. The “worship of wonder,” as Carlyle calls it, was theirs, and that is by no means a bad sort of worship to begin with. And Cæsar, though he was a pagan too, had got a little further than this, and he was a fine hero for them to wonder over. Even on that first short visit, the brave, wise Roman and the sturdy islanders must have come to understand each other a little, and the work of civilisation must have been begun. But it was not done all at once, nor quite peaceably.

It was a century after Cæsar's first two visits that the Romans came again to Britain, and then they came to stay, and stayed four hundred years. Now and then, and here and there, a British chieftain would make a sturdy resistance to the conquerors, but there is no record of any actual battle being fought at any time on British soil between the natives and the Roman invaders. The later governors of the islands who were sent from Rome, and especially one named Agricola, carried on the conquest of Britain in the same wise generous spirit in which Julius Cæsar had thought about it and begun it. The Romans in Britain were altogether more like a superior sort of visitors than hard-hearted conquerors, and during the four centuries that their occupation lasted, the good work of civilisation, which means growing in wisdom and in strength, went steadily forward.

pagan, a religious heathen, a man who worships gods, but not God.

PART II

KING ARTHUR



CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF ARTHUR TO HIS KINGDOM

KING ARTHUR ruled over Britain somewhere between the landing of the Romans and the reign of Alfred the Great. The "noble histories" which have come down to us of these times are not quite history, and there is consequently no dull exactness of dates about them. Arthur was the son of Uther Pendragon, King of all England, and of Igraine, the fair widowed Duchess of Tintagil. There were some people who doubted the marriage of Arthur's parents, but Uther was really his father, and Queen Igraine was really his mother, though Merlin the magician was the only person who knew the whole truth about the royal marriage, and who knew, too, how long and how loyally Uther had loved Igraine. But because of

the secret and the doubt, it was thought better that the little prince should not be brought up at Court, and from the very first he was put into the wise Merlin's charge. But Merlin, wise as he was, and he was in truth very wise indeed, found that he could not manage a baby without help, and he cast about for some good kind people to whom he could entrust the upbringing of the heir to the throne. He chose a certain Sir Ector and his wife, a kind couple, who had a small son of their own, called Kay, exactly the same age as Arthur. The two baby boys became foster brothers, and grew to love each other greatly, and as the king died before Arthur's second birthday, the little son of Uther and Igraine, knowing nothing of his royal birth, came to look upon Sir Ector and his wife as his parents, and on Kay as his very own brother. The death of Uther Pendragon put the realm into jeopardy, and for a long while there was no settled government, and no king at its head. Each of the mighty barons longed for the kingship, but none had the right to it, and no one of them all, by

right of might, could hold it of his own prowess against the rest. Merlin alone knew what some guessed, and some doubted, and some denied, that the kingdom belonged to Arthur, and Merlin determined to prove it to them all in a way that should not fail to be convincing. He consulted with the Archbishop of Canterbury, and presently all the barons were summoned to London, and in the place where St Paul's Cathedral now stands, and which was then a churchyard, they were shown a great square stone, and in this stone was firmly set a gleaming naked sword, and on the stone, in big letters of gold, shone these words, "Whoso can pull this sword out of this stone is rightful-born King of all England." Then, after solemn prayer by the archbishop, one after another of the barons, some quite light-heartedly, and some in slow and ponderous fashion, tried to pull out the sword. But none succeeded. The sword remained fast fixed in the stone, and five knights were presently appointed to the duty of guarding it. Time went on, and young Arthur, to whom still none spoke of his high

destiny, was riding one day with Sir Ector and Kay, and a goodly company. Some were to witness, and some to take part in, a feat of arms, or jousting, as it was called in those days. Suddenly Sir Kay, who had only quite recently been made a knight, found that he had lost his sword, or left it behind, and he begged Arthur to go back for it. Willingly enough Arthur rode off, and failing to find the sword and fearing for Kay's disappointment, suddenly bethought him of the sword in the stone. "My brother Kay shall not be without a sword," he said to himself. "I will ride on to the churchyard and see if I am able to pull it out of the stone." So he tied his horse to the stile, and soon stood by the great, unguarded stone, for the knights who should have been there on guard had all gone off to the jousting. And then Arthur, baring his head in the churchyard, took hold of the handle of the sword, and, wonderful to say, out came the sword at once, readily, and as it almost seemed gladly, into his hand. Quickly he brought it to Sir Kay, who, more worldly wise than Arthur, looked at it and

wondered. "Am I the chosen King of England, my father?" he asked, "for see, here is the sword in my hand." "How came you by this?" demanded Sir Ector. "By my brother Arthur," answered Kay at once; "he brought it to me." And Arthur added, eagerly and simply enough, "Sir, I will tell you. When I came home for my brother's sword, I found none at home to deliver it to me, and so I thought my brother Kay should not be swordless, and I came hither quickly and pulled it out of the stone."

Then Sir Ector and Sir Kay knelt down before Arthur, and rendered homage, and Arthur, greatly marvelling, asked, "My own dear father and brother, why kneel ye to me?" And then the secret of his royalty was told to Arthur; and it was further explained to him how the wisdom of Merlin had designed this test and delayed it till Arthur was grown. And once again the sword was put back in the stone, and Arthur looked on while these good knights, father and son, put forth all their strength and were powerless to move it. "And now shalt thou essay," said Sir Ector to Arthur, and wonder-

ing and convinced, quite easily Arthur pulled the sword out of the stone. But even as he had sought possession of the sword not for himself, but for his brother, so Arthur's first feeling was not of delight to know that he was king, but of sorrow to know that kind Sir Ector was not his father. "And if it be God's will that I be king," he said, "then shall my brother Sir Kay be seneschal of all my lands." And loyally unto the end was the generous, impulsive promise kept.

jeopardy, danger, peril.

seneschal, guardian, overseer.

CHAPTER V

ARTHUR'S SWORD, AND HOW HE USED IT

THE coronation of the king quickly followed the test of the stone; but though rich and poor alike rejoiced that the succession was settled, and the archbishop blessed Arthur, and the barons kneeled to him, things did not go altogether smoothly. Though very few really doubted Arthur's right to rule, many denied it; some of the great barons grudging the kingship to so young a man, and one or another, perhaps, secretly desiring it for himself. And when these barons from all parts of the kingdom met in council, "there was no meekness," we read in the old chronicles, "but stout words on all sides." And stout deeds often followed on the words, but always Arthur

bravely held his own. "As for death," he said, "welcome be it when it cometh, but I had rather die than be shamed." And the shame that Arthur had in his mind was the shame of wrong-doing, and the only fear he knew was the fear of the all-seeing God. In the perils of war, or in the chances of adventure, the king would take his turn and place with the poorest of his knights, and his men, marvelling at his courage, said it was merry as well as good to follow such a chieftain.

The sword that Arthur used in battle was not the one that had proved his birthright, but one with a very beautiful and richly-jewelled hilt that came to him in a most mysterious way. Merlin, in those early years, whether in camp or at council, was never far from Arthur, and one day when they were riding together they came to a lake, and on its broad waters there seemed to be a gleam of something white and shining. Coming nearer, they saw that this was an uplifted arm "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful," and nearer yet they could see that the fair hand waved a

sword. As Arthur and Merlin looked, a grandly-dressed damsel stepped down from a rock and saluted them, and, "O king," said this fair maiden, "I am the Lady of the Lake, and that sword thou seest yonder is mine, and its name is Excalibur, which is to say, Cut-steel, and the scabbard is worthy of the sword, for whiles thou hast it, no blood canst thou lose, howsoever sore wounded: and sword and scabbard both, lo! I give them to thee." Then Arthur, the king, greatly pleased, rowed himself in his barge to where the gleam was on the lake, and as he reverently took the sword by its jewel-encrusted hilt, the shining white arm that had held it vanished under the water. Then he and Merlin remounted their horses and went on their way to Camelot, which is now Winchester. But first Arthur lingered, begging the Lady of the Lake to take some token of his gratitude. Nought would she take of present or of promise save a right to ask from the king an unnamed gift at some unnamed time. But this, not knowing her, and not knowing what her request might prove to be, Arthur could not bestow. And

wise was his prudence, for when, years after, she came to Court and made her claim, it was for the head of a living knight! And since there seems much doubt whether Excalibur was hers to give, and no doubt at all but that the Hand in the Water could have yielded it to Arthur without mortal help or introduction, little pity does this forward Lady of the Lake earn from us that the unseemly guerdon which she begged was not granted to her.

Sword and scabbard both proved their virtues in the using. By aid of Excalibur, Arthur killed giants and made ordinary-sized Romans and Saracens "flee like sheep." In one encounter, certainly, he was in great peril of his life and his wounds bled freely, but this was because the sword he wielded in that battle was not in truth Excalibur, but one "counterfeit and brittle and false." His half-sister Morgan-le-Fay, wife of King Uriens, was responsible for this fraud which Arthur could never have suspected. She wanted a knight named Accalon to win renown, and so

she had a sword and scabbard made in all outward likeness to Arthur's famous Excalibur. Then, secretly, she changed the two swords, buckling the false one on Arthur, and giving the true one to Accalon. So it came to pass that in the battle Arthur was sorely hurt, but he was so "full of knighthood," we read, "that knightly he endured the pain," and, in truth, the pain from his wound was far less than the pain of having been deceived by one he trusted. But he soon got his own sword back again, and by its help he tilted as heretofore, with grace in the tournament, and with success in the field. After a battle was won, Arthur would kneel on the stained and trodden grass and thank God for the victory: "Not unto us," he would say, "be the glory," and before he ate or rested, he would send surgeons to tend the hurt and wounded both of foes and friends, and he would see to it himself that no care and no salves were spared. Small wonder that "this most manly man that liveth, this noble conqueror Arthur," as his contemporaries called him, made firm allies of rival princes, and

made each one of them proud to join with him in the noble fellowship of the Table Round.

guerdon, reward.

contemporaries, men of one's own age.

CHAPTER VI

PER ENSEM JUSTITIA

THE idea of the Table Round seems to have been due to the sagacity of Merlin, who made it thus, he said, in token of the roundness of the world, but perhaps, moreover, as a sort of symbol of Arthur's sway which was to be smooth and rounded and complete. The Table at which Arthur's Council was to sit must have no angles or corners about it, for these make barriers to good fellowship. Very much, Merlin in his wisdom knew, may be accomplished by men who meet often with a like aim and under like and comfortable conditions. The knights who fought for the king and served him would fight and serve the better for the thought of the Table. There, at Council or at Board, they all sat round with their king, and all with equally

good seats. They would be the less jealous and the more united for it. They would work for the Table, rather than each one for his own indistinguishable seat at it. The idea was good and it was Merlin's, but the ideal was Arthur's. Merlin's thought was for the king and the stability of his kingdom, but Arthur's thought went much beyond that. He wanted his knights of the Table Round to be "the fair beginning of a time, . . . to serve as model for the mighty world."

Arthur knew that to establish his kingdom and to maintain his rule, there must be warfare ; hard fighting often against wrong, and hard fighting sometimes to keep and to uphold the right. And in all wars, even of the righteous and inevitable sort, the great king knew, there is an evil element. War he could not away with, but he could give his knights an antidote to the evil. And Arthur's antidote was conduct, and Arthur's ideal of conduct came to be called chivalry. And this we may take to be the meaning of chivalry as King Arthur meant the word. The knights of the Round Table were bound to be gentle and

brave, and loyal and courteous; to bear themselves in battle without fear, and in pain or death without flinching; defeat they must take without complaint, and victory without boasting. There must be just cause for every encounter, and the very best of just causes was held to be the succour of the poor and the oppressed, and the righting of the wrongs of women and children. There must be honourable dealing with friends, and honour and something besides—an extra gentleness and forbearance—in dealing with enemies. It was held a duty to be cheerful, an obligation to be just, and a pleasure to be merciful. Rank was no claim to the circle of Arthur's knights, and poverty was no bar to it. A churl by birth might by conduct claim to be called "gentle," and the gentle by birth might by conduct be held churl.

It sounds all a little like poetry; but great truths are not seldom kept most safely in tradition, and are often handed down to us in ballad form. And, as a matter of fact, a great many of the "noble histories," as Caxton, who printed them, called these chronicles of King Arthur, were

first written in poetry and some of them even in French poetry. But they are real "histories" for all that, and quite as much a grateful inheritance from our forefathers as are our Roman roads.

per ensem justitia, Latin for "justice through the sword."

sagacity, wisdom.

indistinguishable, without difference, equal.

inevitable, that cannot be avoided.

antidote, a medicine to correct, means to counteract.

CHAPTER VII

ARTHUR'S KNIGHTS

ARTHUR'S subjects came by degrees to understand what the king meant, and even some of them perhaps, a little, to understand the great king himself; and every one of his knights laboured, and many of them succeeded, and some excelled, in the doing of high deeds and the thinking of pure thoughts. There was Kay, the faithful senechal, always a little blunt, and always more of brother than of courtier in his ways with the king, but knowing no other love all his loyal life through than his love for Arthur. And there was Sir Bors, whose service to the king came in the sad end to mean, "love that was grief and love besides"; and Sir Percivale, the pure of heart, whom "no temptation brought out of God's service," and to whose gentle handling

even the lion of the forest submitted ; and Sir Galahad, who alone of them all, as you will read in the "historie" of the Holy Grail, was accounted worthy of the best. And Dagonet, who was only the court jester, deserves a word of remembrance, since he it was whom Arthur made knight, with the extra distinction of the accolade of Excalibur, for what seems the very sufficient reason that Dagonet's jests were always good, and were always of the sort to make good men and women laugh. Then there was Tor, who, being worthy of knighthood, was made Sir Tor, although the king and the court knew him as but the thirteenth son of Aries the cowherd. By-and-bye it was found out that Tor was in very truth a son of Pellinore the king ; but prince, or knight, or cowherd, Tor came to be best remembered as the "passing good knight who sayeth little and doeth much."

Then there was Sir Tristram, a Cornish knight, who both said and did a great deal more than was wise or well. Tristram's was a sad story. His very name was sad ; it meant the sorrowful-born child, for his mother had died

when he was a baby, and she gave him the name, saying she was "full sorry to depart from this world." And when he was only seven, his father married again, and his stepmother was very cruel to little Tristram, and would have poisoned him in order that her own son might be heir to their father. And she put poison in the nursery, and by mistake, her own child drank out of the poisoned cup. Then she grew yet more cruel, and perhaps more careless, for when she again tried to poison Tristram, her sin was discovered, and she was condemned to be burned. And it was Tristram who entreated for her pardon, and in the end won it, and this beautiful forgiveness of his changed her whole nature, and she came to love Tristram as much as she had formerly hated him. But when he grew to be a man, Tristram fell in love with la belle Iseult, who had, alas! a husband of her own, and that the husband, who was King Mark of Cornwall, was neither a good man nor a kind husband, did not, of course, make their love affair a right one, and great troubles and many a perilous adventure came of it. Then

there were the brothers Sir Gareth and Sir Gawain, who married two sisters, the Ladies Lionesse and Linette, and wonderful trials and difficulties did these two pairs of lovers pass through and surmount. For love of Lionesse, Gareth served a whole year in the palace in the disguise of a kitchen page, enduring a good deal of rough usage the while from Sir Kay the seneschal, who had perhaps not quite sympathy enough for that sort of love. Lionesse was always quite clear and decided about what she wanted: "Wit ye well, my Lord Arthur," she said to the king, "he is my first love, and he shall be my last;" and as Gawain and Linette were equally determined, it all came right in the end, as love stories mostly do when everybody is good. And this Sir Gareth, whom Lionesse loved, showed himself indeed what the old chronicler claims him to have been, "a noble knight, and well-ruled and fair-languaged."

And so much as this, at least, it seems could be said of all Arthur's Table Round. There was no bearing of malice, no speaking of slander, and no jealousy. Even in their quarrels, they

bore themselves one to another as became god-fearing knights and self-respecting gentlemen. "Sir," once said Sir Launcelot of the Lake, and he was speaking to a quite undistinguished antagonist, "Sir, I pray you forgive me; if I was unadvised, I will amend it." That was it. They would "amend" it if they were in the wrong, and they would fight it out fairly if they were in the right. And when a wrong had been wiped out in blood, or equally when an injury was forgiven, it no longer existed; alike from speech as from memory, it was utterly blotted out. In Arthur's Court the ancient law against hating a brother in one's heart was upheld, and bearing a grudge was accounted a dishonour no less than a sin.

accolade, striking on the shoulder with a sword, the sign of knight-hood.

la belle, French for "the beautiful."

antagonist, personal enemy.

CHAPTER VIII

ARTHUR'S QUEEN

THERE came a time in Arthur's wars when Merlin had to say, "Hast thou not had enough? It is time to say Hold." There was just the doggedness in those battlefields of old, the like of which we honour in the battlefields of to-day. The men would "mend their harness and take new spears, and sit still as if they had been cut out of wood," says the old chronicle, which is really but another way of telling the story of pluck and patience which we read in our newspapers at this day. But the time did at last come when invaders were afraid and home enemies were subdued, and the king could give thought to the grace and graciousness of life as well as to its greatness, and be to his Court what he was to his camp. And of all his

knights who excelled in gallant deeds, fulfilling Arthur's purpose, though failing somewhat in Arthur's ideal, the greatest of them all in both ways, and nearest to his heart, was Sir Launcelot of the Lake. "For pure strength and clear knight-hood," it is written in the histories, "in bounty and in courtesy, Launcelot bare the prize above all knights that ever were in the days of the great king!" The "knight peerless," his companions of the Round Table called him, and none of them was jealous of his powers, but all held it high honour to be second unto him whether in their mimic fights that were called tournaments or in the real grave battles against heathen foes that were, more or less, the business of their lives. Launcelot was gentle and strong, and merry and wise, and very goodly to look on besides, so there is small wonder that Arthur loved him and even leaned on him a little, and of course trusted him utterly. And Arthur's queen, who was called Guinevere, and who was a king's daughter as well as a king's wife, she also greatly admired Launcelot, and Launcelot loved her, and King Arthur, who was

so entirely good and true, that he was almost unable to think evil of people—we remember how he used the counterfeit Excalibur to his hurt, refusing to believe that Morgan - le - Fay could be false—he quite rejoiced in this liking of his beautiful queen for his dearest knight. It made an easy and a perfect intimacy in the palace as in the camp, and kings, perforce, can enjoy few intimacies. But in the end, it came to pass that from those two whom of all the world he loved most, the king suffered most.

There was no nursery in the palace, for Guinevere had no children, so when the king would ride forth with his knights to a jousting or a pageant, the beautiful, gay young queen would oftentimes mount her palfrey and ride forth with them; and if Arthur were recalled or delayed by affairs of State, she would canter on with Launcelot, or linger with him in the sunlight among her flowers till the king could join them. And both men loved her: Launcelot for his pleasure, and Arthur for her pleasure; but neither the king nor the knight loved her in the way to bring out the best in her. The king

wanted everything to be bright and beautiful and pleasant for Guinevere, and therefore feared to let her share fully in the sober purpose of his life; and Launcelot, when he was with the queen, forgot altogether that life has any purpose at all. And this, it is quite possible, made him the more delightful companion, and led the queen to contrast Sir Launcelot with her husband. Arthur, intent on his high thoughts, may sometimes well have seemed to his wife a little dull or even a little cold. She had often to stand on tiptoe as it were to reach up to Arthur, and that was a strain. The king seemed aloof, and Launcelot was near, and by degrees she came to like better to be with Launcelot and, in a way, even to like Launcelot better than the king. And both men loved her for her grace and for her beauty, and, loved that way, Guinevere came to take love and all things lightly. She found out at last, but then it was too late, that "life is real, life is earnest," and that to fulfil the purpose of her life, to "do a man good and not evil all the days of his life," a woman must be something besides charming. So blameless

king, and beautiful queen, and "peerless knight," dreamed on; once there came to them all the chance of a happy awakening, but, as we shall see in the next chapter, it only came and passed.

counterfeit, imitated, false.

of course tales of the Court had travelled to the castle, and the Lily Maid of Astolat, as the people called Sir Bernard's one little motherless daughter, had listened eagerly to all that could be told her of King Arthur and his knights, and her father and her brothers had taken good heed that the tales were always such as a maid should love to hear.

So Elaine, though she dreamed about great deeds and great heroes, more, perhaps, than her mother, had she been living, might have thought quite well for her, still quite justified the pretty name she went by, and as she grew into girlhood, no lily of the field was more fair or sweet or pure than the Lily Maid of Astolat. It was not in the very least surprising, though, that this simple country maiden, when the great Sir Launcelot, with his gallant mien and his courtly bearing, came to be a guest at Astolat, should fall straightway in love with love, and him. Launcelot seemed to Elaine the real live hero of all the stories and of all her dreams, and indeed the charm of the "knight peerless" was so potent that it worked on the father and

the brothers as well as on the sweet daughter of the house, and Sir Bernard and his sons looked on at Elaine's devotion with an indulgent smile, and perhaps a hope besides. But Sir Launcelot's eyes, alas! were too much dazzled with the sunlight, too much filled with visions of the sunset of yesterday and the sunrise of to-morrow, to give any heed to the rising of this pure morning star. And presently, off he rode to the jousts, and Sir Lavaine, the favourite brother of Elaine, proudly and gaily enough rode off with him. But first Sir Launcelot begged from his hosts the loan of a shield without ornament or device, and the Lily Maid, seeing that the one which was brought to him was entirely plain, asked shyly might she bind her colours on it? Now Launcelot in his love for the queen had never borne flower or favour from any lady of her court; but when Elaine asked this, he smiled "yes" at the child, and questioned what were her colours? And Elaine answered, "a red sleeve broidered in pearls." And he, seeing in it only the better disguise, since men knew Sir

Launcelot wore no lady's colours, let the Maid bind her sleeve on the shield. And Elaine thought it was for love of her, and went back to the hall to look on the great knight's shield, and to dream again.

In the jousting Sir Launcelot did many a deed of daring and of grace, but once he got a bad fall and lay stunned, and when his visor was raised, it was seen that he was Launcelot. And long he lay unconscious, and the Lily Maid of Astolat, as was the kindly fashion of the high-born damsels of that day, helped in the tending of his wounds. Very slowly he got back his strength, and more slowly still, he got to learn Elaine's sad little secret. Then, sad and shamed that he could not return her love, as soon as he was once more sound, Launcelot buckled on his own shield and silently rode away.

Now, whispers of Launcelot's tilting, and of Launcelot's wounds, and of the red sleeve with the pearls, had been buzzed about the Court, and when he came back a great silent sadness of understanding and mis-

understanding fell between Launcelot and his queen. And meanwhile Elaine—we know she had no mother, and fathers and brothers, however loving, are very little good in such matters—Elaine, poor child, just quietly drooped and died. And there was great dole in Astolat, and a sorrowful eagerness to fulfil the last strange request of the child whom all had petted and none before had crossed. The day after the pretty wistful eyes had closed, a black barge passed out from under the old bridge at Astolat, and was deftly steered through the windings of the Wey up the broad current of the Thames, and moored at Westminster, where sat the Court. And much the king and the queen marvelled, for on the deck of this black barge there was the richest canopied couch, and the fairest young girl was lying on the couch as if asleep. But soon Arthur and Guinevere saw that this was not sleep, but death ; and in the little cold white hand, tight grasped, they saw there was a letter. The courtiers gathered round, and gently they opened this letter, and, “Oh ! most noble knight, Sir Launcelot,” therein was

written, "I have died for love of thee ; thou wouldst not, and I could not ; and now put me to rest." A great hush of pity fell on that gay crowd of courtiers, and the king, not knowing, mused sadly over this waste of love, and wondered that his dear knight should not have loved so fair a maid. But, quick to help and slow to doubt, Arthur was the first to break the silence : "And, in truth," said this noble, generous king, "love must arise of the heart, it will not be bounden," and he turned to Launcelot, and laid his good right hand on his shoulder, consoling him. And the queen, who did know, broke into a very passion of weeping, and, "Oh, why not have shown the maid some love, some gentleness?" she cried ; and then, more wildly, "Oh, why was I wroth with thee causeless?" and her ladies, whispering, and glancing under their lashes at Launcelot and at the king, essayed in vain to console her. And Launcelot, he could answer nothing, neither to Arthur nor to Guinevere. In that white presence, even the right that he had done, the not marrying Elaine because of not loving her,

even that somehow seemed a wrong. It was all a sad and weary puzzle, and to those, alas! to whom it was least puzzling, it was most sad.

visor, the part of the helmet that protected the eyes ; mask.

dole, mourning.

CHAPTER X

THE QUEST OF THE SANGREAL

IT came to pass after many years of successful fighting, when Arthur's rule was acknowledged, his foes subdued, and his realm at peace, that the spirit of adventure which possessed his knights sought a fresh field for its exercise. Of actual warfare there was a lull, and the mimic war of joust and tournament did not satisfy this longing. And because Arthur's was a rule of righteousness, it was natural that even those of his knights who stumbled over its practice should, in their craving for the pleasure of new peril, still dimly desire to follow after righteousness. So presently among these happy warriors, all very fond of adventure, and all very familiar with the sights and the sounds that are strange to ordinary folks, a wondrous rumour

rose of a far-off vision which some had caught, and some perchance had dreamed, of a fair maiden clothed in shining white, who bore aloft a golden vessel. And the precious essence of Life Eternal was held to be in this vessel which the maiden held, since the sick, it was said, were healed, and the sorry comforted, as the gleam from the Grail touched them as it passed.

None had actually seen the Sangreal, and no one of the knights knew more concerning it than these tales, which were told from one to another, of a wondrous light, and a strong sweet scent in the air that came with a feeling rather than a sense of blessed vision. But to them all it seemed, as they spoke of it, that here was the chance of adventure of an entirely new sort, and of adventure where the reward also would be of an entirely different kind from that for which they had hitherto striven. Here would be no Castle Perilous to besiege, no fair damsel to rescue or to woo, no dragon to fight, no giant to overcome. It was only to follow the gleam, to touch the Grail, and then, healed of hurt and eased of longing, to know the new

calm of peace, in place of the old glow of conquest.

But of all Arthur's knights who essayed this adventure, three only attained to that Perfect Peace of which they dreamed. And these three were Sir Bors and Sir Percivale and Sir Galahad. And Bors and Percivale came to this knowledge of the highest because they conquered the "inclination of their eyes, and of their hearts" which lead men astray; and Galahad beheld it because from his very birth his heart was wholly steadfast in the covenant. "And sithen Sir Galahad," it is written in the old chronicles, "was there never man so hardy to say that he had seen the Sangreal." "Now see I what hath been many a day my desire," said this quite pure and sinless knight, "and now, oh blessed Lord, if it might please Thee, I would no longer live." And thereupon, the "historie" tells us, Galahad kneeled and kissed the holy vessel and straightway a great multitude of angels bare his soul up to Heaven. In very truth, in the striving after the Grail, and not in the grasping of it, lay its virtue; the desire for the Highest, the willing-

ness to leave all to follow It, the readiness to resign Court and comfort, and cheerfully to endure, in straitness and in want of all things, for Its sake,—in this, and not in It, was the Reward. The Quest itself was but the shadow of all worthy seeking: the sum and substance was the fulfilment of Arthur's law. And Arthur's knights, who so eagerly took up this new adventure, in the end learnt this. They followed the Light whithersoever it led, in cold and in heat, over hill and heather, and through swamp, and forest and stream, and "the remnant that came home, after long passing in the Quest," these saw at last that the gleam of the Grail was but the symbol of the service, and the why of their failing to grasp the shadow was made clear to them. They had let the substance slip from their keeping: their hearts had lacked righteousness, and therefore it was that their eyes could not look on the vision of it.

When Sir Gawain, baffled and spent, was marvelling once that he, so successful in all other adventures, should be here so utterly at a loss, a hermit who was passing by said to him, "Sir,

how standeth it betwixt God and you?" Then Gawain understood. "It appeareth not to sinners," was whispered to another gay and gallant knight; and yet another, wise in the world's wisdom and famed for his courage and his charm, learnt humility in being told, "These three things have failed thee: charity, and chastity, and truth." But of all the knights, the lesson of the Quest was learnt most thoroughly and most sadly by Sir Launcelot. "Show me something of that I seek," he cried in his despair, after long months of vain following of the Light. He had followed it steadfastly enough, though he had so utterly failed to uphold it, or to hand it on, or to make of it a lamp unto his feet. And now, after many days, weary and unsatisfied, he found himself close to an old chapel whence shone out "a great clearness, as bright as though all the torches of the world had been there." And Launcelot knew that here, at last, was the Grail, but with all his great will and longing, he could find no place to enter in. So there, without, and groping in the Light, the great knight fell to sore weeping, and cursed

the time that he was born, "And, oh sweet Lord," he said, "when shall my sorrow leave me? When shall the holy vessel come where-with I shall be blessed. Long have I endured for little trespass." Very sad and very strange it seemed to Launcelot that when he sought worldly adventure he had been ever successful, and that now when he sought holy things he had no power to stir or speak or see. And as he waited and wept, complaining and beating vainly at the door, a good man came to him, and, "Sir," said he, "art thou of King Arthur's Court?" "Yea," said Sir Launcelot bitterly enough, "I am that Sir Launcelot of the Lake who once had worship and now am most wretched in the world." "Sir," answered the holy man, "there is no knight living that ought to give God so great thanks as thou, for He hath given thee beauty, seemliness, and great strength above all other knights, and wit and discretion to know good from evil. But little thy strength and manhood will avail if God be against thee. And now thou shalt know Him whether thou wilt or nilt." And at these words, all in a moment

sword and shield and knightly trappings seemed to vanish, and the great knight saw himself not as he was in his own eyes, nor in Arthur's eyes, nor in the queen's, but in a sort of flash as he was in God's sight; and there, behold! he was naked and ashamed. "And now, do I see and understand," he exclaimed, "that mine own sin hindereth me and shameth me." And truly he repented, and was moved to tell that good man all his life; how he had loved the queen "immeasurably," and had done his great deeds of arms for the most part for the queen's sake, and to win worship, and to be the better beloved, and "little or nought had thanked God of it." "Never did I battle all and only for God's sake," he ended. And the good man, seeing that he really did repent, gave no reproof, but counselled him only to put away his sin, and to see to it that "mouth and heart were in accord." "And he sorrowed," says the historie, "till it was day and he heard the birds sing, and then somehow he was comforted." And presently he mounted his horse, which the holy man had stabled and fed for him, and giving up the

Quest, rode back, repentant, to Camelot, thinking, for the first time for many a long year, more of his meeting with Arthur than of his meeting with the queen.

sangreal, holy vessel (greal, grael, or grail, vessel).

sithen, since.

nilt, wilt not.

CHAPTER XI

THE KING'S AWAKENING

WHILST so many of his knights were absent, following the Grail, King Arthur came to have cause for disquiet in his Court, and in his realm. Sir Mordred, his nephew, had not joined the Quest of the Grail, and being both unworthy and unemployed, a covetous craving for the crown, to which there was no direct heir, gradually took possession of this traitorous knight. Envious thoughts did Sir Mordred think, and slanderous words did Sir Mordred speak, of those absent heroes, whom he looked upon as rivals, and most he thought, and most he sneered, concerning the "knight peerless." And unworthy as Mordred was, and was by many known to be, yet were there some who listened when his

whispers touched on Launcelot and the queen, for here, alas! even the silence which some kindly folk observed had a meaning hardly less sad than speech. Little heed took the queen though, of the whispers or the glances, and no heed at all of the king's nephew. She went a-maying with her ladies, or, clad in shimmering robes of green and silver, she gave gay repasts to the stay-at-home knights, "but inwardly, wit ye well," says the old book, "she took great thought; but she bare it out with a proud countenance, as though she felt nothing, nor danger." But "danger" there was; for this treacherous Mordred had "new-fangle ways," as the chronicle puts it, which "ways" it is likely some of the new generation liked better than those of Arthur, for since the absence of his loved knights, and especially of Sir Launcelot, the king had grown a little more distant, a little more devoted to duty, a little less inclined to pleasure even than of old. Thus, in half-shamed silence, the doubts and the discontents of the nobles began to grow into something like rebellion.

And when the remnant of the knights returned, Mordred was there with his little, cruel, keen eyes, watching the queen, and quick to note the joyousness of her welcome to Launcelot, the great gladness which she was too sincere, or it may be too careless, to conceal. And too soon it came to pass that Launcelot "forgot the promise and perfection he made in the Quest," and at last the whispers got loud enough to awaken the king from the deep, calm repose of his trustfulness. And when he was roused, Arthur demanded at once, and sternly, to be told "the meaning of this noise," and then his knights, each telling the other that it was his duty to speak, took heart to tell him all. For a long time Arthur could not, and would not, believe that his friend and his queen had been false to love, and false to duty, but when hoping all things and believing all things was no longer possible, then Arthur remembered that he was Righteous Judge, and sworn to be Protector and Upholder of the Faith. And the doom for such treason as that of Guinevere, by the law that the Romans had left, was death at

the stake. And the tender-hearted king hardened himself to fulfil the law. The beautiful butterfly queen, despoiled of her robes and her crown, was condemned to die, and among the lords and ladies who had been the quickest to whisper, there was now "weeping and wailing and wringing of hands." But even as the dread doom was pronounced on the shuddering queen, a word out of the awful stillness had come to her ears: "Have ye no doubt," it said, "while I am living, I will rescue you." Yet the slow hours went on, and no respite came, and the dreadful day dawned, and the sad procession was actually nearing the fire, when suddenly, there was a spurring of horses and "a great rushing and hurling," and Sir Launcelot, at the head of a little band of devoted followers, was there, and speedily put to the sword or put to flight all who made effort to withstand him. Forty of Arthur's good knights though were slain, before Launcelot, hastily casting kirtle and cloak round the fainting, disrobed queen, put her beside him on his horse and galloped off to his own castle of Joyous Gard.

When King Arthur heard of that desperate rescue, he "swooned," says the chronicler, "from pure sorrow," and almost more did it seem that he sorrowed for the breaking up of the fair fellowship of the Table Round than for the loss of his fair queen; and "alas!" said the king, lamenting his good knights, "alas! that ever I bare crown." And there still remained to him the hard duty of making war on Launcelot—the duty, and the sadness, and the overwhelming pity of it. "But it shall be done," said the king. "I suppose I am yet big enough," he added bitterly, "to draw him out of the biggest tower of his castle." Dolorous Gard, Launcelot called his castle now! and in his deep remorse, he would have come to the king without being "drawn." In the end he did come, bringing with him the weeping and repentant queen, to kneel before Arthur, and to have her sin forgiven her. But first the war had to be fought out. "I have no heart to fight against my Lord Arthur," owned Launcelot; and, "Alas that this war was ever begun," sighed Arthur, but the knights were all clamor-

ous for battle. "The king may do as he will," said Sir Gawain, guessing pretty well how Arthur felt, "but wit thou well, Sir Launcelot, everlasting war shall be betwixt us." Sir Gawain and the rest of the knights could not forget the slaying of their brothers in that dreadful rescue, and neither the charm of Launcelot, nor his remorse, nor the beauty, nor the grief of Guinevere moved them to forgive. Sir Bors alone of all the Table Round had some sorrowful understanding of the sadness as well as of the sin, and though he condemned, he clung to Launcelot, and would have done battle for the lonely, forsaken queen. "And shall I make an end?" he once questioned, when in the clash of combat Arthur was unhorsed, and for a moment in deadly peril. And the meaning of Sir Bors was to slay the king, for well did he, in his grim faithfulness, divine that his stroke would be welcome. But Launcelot saw it all, both the peril and the doubt, and he rushed to the rescue of the king, and on his knees he gave Arthur his sword, and his shield, and his horse. "And tears," the old

chronicler tells us, "burst from the king's eyes," as, without a word, and unhurt, Arthur put his foot into the stirrup which Launcelot, with bowed head, held for him.

dolorous, sad.

CHAPTER XII

THE PASSING OF ARTHUR

SO Queen Guinevere put off her shimmering robes, and, forgiven by the king and shriven by the priests, she journeyed to the convent at Almesbury. And there she wore sad-coloured garments, rising early, and living the simple life of the good nuns, and praying often, and regularly, even as they did. Only she prayed an extra prayer: "I beseech Thee, Almighty God," said the poor queen who had come at last to see things right, "I beseech Thee that I may never have power to see Sir Launcelot with my worldly eyes." And Launcelot, when that weary war was over, he "departed from the Court for ever." "And," says the historie, "wholly an hundred knights departed with

him, making their avows they would never leave him for weal or for woe." And "there was neither king, nor duke, nor earl, baron, nor knight, nor lady," adds the old chronicler, "but wept as people out of their mind," when Launcelot, in his shame and sorrow, departed from the realm which, as he sadly said, he had "loved above all other realms." And when, after many days, Launcelot came back from beyond the seas, Guinevere was already two days dead. Thus her prayer was answered; it was upon her beautiful dead face that Launcelot looked, and looking, the book says, "wept not greatly, but sighed." With reverent rites she was buried beside King Arthur, for the noble king had by then also entered into his rest.

And this was the manner of Arthur's passing. Whilst the war was being waged with Launcelot, a treaty had been made by the king with Mordred that this nephew and heir should rule Cornwall and Kent during Arthur's life, and "after, all England." But the traitor had gone from his word and quickly claimed all the kingdom at

once, and he had collected a host near Dover, where a great battle was fought between the king's men and his. And "alas, the unhappy day," said Arthur, as he mounted his war horse, and more than once, in the stress and tumult of the strife, did the king sigh, "Oh, Sir Launcelot, this day do I sore miss thee." It was a hard duty for Arthur to have to fight without some, and against others, of that once fair fellowship of noble knights, and to fight, too, to preserve a crown that he "not greatly cared to lose." But to conquer that traitor Mordred was a duty; and, "Tide me life, betide me death," said the king, "he shall never escape my hands." And well did Arthur fight that day, and well was he seconded by his men, and as night began to fall, the enemy was routed and the victory was with the king. Then did Arthur grasp his sword hard with both his hands, and crying, "Traitor, now is thy death day come," he ran full-tilt at Sir Mordred, and Mordred fell "stark dead to the earth." But alas! with all his dying force the traitor smote at Arthur, and the king, deadly wounded, was borne, swooning, from the field.

He was carried to a little chapel close by the sea, and as, very slowly, he came back to consciousness, it was to a consciousness of death and not of life. And the king was glad. Life fulfils itself in many ways, and not always what seems sad is sad. This at least was surely well: the great king was not grieved to go. He had fought the good fight, and he was quite ready—glad, indeed—to lay down his arms. But "Take," he said to the knight who stood beside him, the bold Sir Bedivere, "take thou Excalibur, my good sword, and I charge thee, throw it in that water and come again and tell me what thou seest;" and, "My lord," answered Sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done." But when this knight looked on the rich jewels in the hilt of the famous sword, he deemed it "harm and loss" to throw it into the sea. So Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur, and, returning, told the king he had done his command. "And what sawest thou there?" asked Arthur. "Nought but waves and wind," was the answer, and the dying king knew that he, unable to punish a lie, was being told one. "That is

untruly said," he sighed, "go again." And once again Sir Bedivere went, and yet once again, thinking it sin to cast away that noble sword, he returned, telling Arthur he saw nothing "but the waters wap and the waves wan." And hard it was for Arthur, with his sword arm useless, to know that one of his own knights could lie, and lie for base longing of the jewels on a sword. But at the third time of going, Sir Bedivere was true to his trust; he threw the sword as far into the water as he could, and then he saw the sight that the king had hoped for—a white hand that caught Excalibur and brandished it thrice, and then vanished with it under the waves. For Arthur, dying, knew that Excalibur had failed, and that none might inherit it. The sword had been the sign of Arthur's power—the power of the heaven-appointed ruler—and in some way, perhaps, the sign was wrong. It may be that the white hand of the Lady of the Lake was not the right source whence a king of England should take the symbol of his rule. It must rest on another and a surer foundation, "broad-based

upon the people's will." In the story of Excalibur, there may be hidden, as a flower in the seed, the whole long struggle of people's right against king's might, the struggle between monarch and parliament, which was to be fought out afterwards in history: and Arthur may have seen, as in a vision, the new "folk peace" that was to be in the place of the old "king's peace" which he had failed to maintain by the sword. And that vision may have soothed the bitterness of death. However this may be, Excalibur returned whence it came. Mysteriously it had come, and mysteriously it went, and between its coming and its going lay the era of the Table Round. And as Sir Bedivere came back to the king, a barge with three fair queens in it was waiting by the water side, and "Now, put me into the barge," said the king. And the three fair queens were weeping; but Arthur was calm. And "Comfort thyself," he said to Sir Bedivere, as the barge glided away, "I go to the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound."

And the barge moved off, and became a

speck upon the tide. And on the morrow, in that little old chapel, the walls of which were grey and crusted with the salt spray of the sea, there, in the chancel lay King Arthur, with a great calm and peace on his face, but dead. And from father to son the tale was told, that the same white hands that had brought the sword to the king had lovingly laid him there, by the sound of the moaning of the sea, and with the sad weeping of the queens. And some told a different tale, maintaining stoutly that the great king had been borne by the weeping queens to the Island Valley of Avilion :

“Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly,”

and that from thence he would come, at his people's need, to reign over them again. They told the tale as they hoped, perhaps, who made this ending to Arthur's story ; but while England's kings keep faith with the token of the shining light, while knightly deeds are done for the sake of honour and the truth,

while every one tries to live in the spirit of the league of the Round Table — King Arthur is reigning still. And so the story is fulfilled.

wap, mournful.

wan, sad.

PART III

ALFRED THE GREAT



MR HAMO THORNEYCROFT'S STATUE OF KING ALFRED.

[To face page 83.]

CHAPTER XIII

ENGLAND AFTER THE ROMANS LEFT IT

IN the year 1901 there died one of the greatest of queens, and just one thousand years before there died one of the greatest of kings, and great queen and great king both were of the same race, and both were rulers of England. But the England of King Alfred was very different indeed from the England of Queen Victoria. It was not then a united England, nor a peaceful nor a prosperous one. Where union rests on force and not on a common love of country, its foundations are very shaky indeed, and there is very little power of building up good works on it, or even of resisting evil ones. And this was the condition of Anglo-Saxon England when Alfred ruled it a thousand years ago. It was Roman

England up to the end of the fifth century, when the Romans, from reasons which belong more to Roman history than to English history, left Britain and went back to their own country. After the Romans went away much of the civilisation which they had brought to Britain seemed to depart with them. Strange to say it came back to us from Rome again, but this was later, and in quite another form. Meanwhile, the islanders seemed very quickly to forget many of the arts of peace which they had learnt from the Romans, and certainly the end of those four hundred years of peaceful Roman occupation showed the natives to be less good warriors than Cæsar had found them. They had not, at any rate, come to understand what Shakespeare calls :—

“The natural bravery of your isle, which stands
As Neptune’s Park, ribbed and paled in
With rocks unscaleable, and roaring waters.”

We can see, and have seen for a good many centuries, that such a “park” needs a navy for park-keepers, but our ancestors do not seem

to have learnt this fact about their country till King Alfred taught it to them. For when hordes of barbarous heathen pirates came sailing up the North Sea and the Channel, making raids on our coasts, there were no British war vessels on the seas to prevent them. These bold sailors came from the bleak lands which are now the prosperous countries of Denmark, and Norway, and Germany. And, once landed on our shores, these Northmen and Saxons fought for settlements inland, and seemed much to prefer the "fogs" of our summers to the frosts of their own long winters. The wild farmers and hunters of Britain proved unable to prevent these invaders from settling in Northumbria in the north, and in Wessex in the south, or even from making their way so far inland as Mercia, which was the big middle part of England. There was no united action against the foe. The kings in each division of the country, and there were several divisions, instead of joining together against these invaders, who were of course an enemy to them all alike, were always quarrelling among themselves, and

fighting against each other. And the people in one part of the country, even when not actual foes, were almost like foreigners to their fellow-countrymen in the other parts of the country. In the different divisions of England there were different customs and different interests, and different modes of speech. Gradually the nation which grew up in our island after the Romans had left it was no longer either British or Roman. The Teutonic tribes, these Northmen and Saxons, who crossed the seas, had mixed with the natives, and the people of England, for a century or more before Alfred was born, had come to be Anglo-Saxons. And by the middle of the ninth century, when Alfred's father was ruling in Wessex, it almost seemed as if the heathen Northmen would have it all their own way, so strong were the invaders and so disunited were the islanders in resisting them.

The country was in a sad state. Very little of the beautiful fertile land was cultivated. The county of Kent, which we call now the Garden of England, was then part forest and part swamp, and, further north or further south,

it was all equally desolate. London itself, the Roman camp beginning of a capital, for two whole centuries was all but empty of inhabitants. Naturally, when the great fighting lords who led, and the small fighting retainers who followed them to the battle-fields were each one of them equally in continual danger of a sudden and violent death, there would be little leisure or inclination to cultivate the arts of peace. Such civilising influence as there was in the country during these fighting centuries, and there was not very much altogether, came from the religious houses, or monasteries, as they were called. Thus we see, how, in a somewhat roundabout fashion, the English for the second time got some of their civilisation from Rome. It was in 597 that Pope Gregory had sent the monk Augustine from Rome on a religious mission to England. The then reigning King of Kent had listened to the good monk, and he and all his Court had become Christians, and at Canterbury, the capital of Kent, the first church in England was consecrated. Gradually, one after another,

religious houses, with lands attached to them, were built all over the country. These monasteries gave out all the little light there was in the dark ages. They came, indeed, to be like small islands in the wide sea of early barbarism. The monks built schools and drained marshes, and turned some of the wild lands into corn-fields and orchards, and some of the wild children into scholars and craftsmen. Their settlements were a school, and a church, and a hospital, in one. They helped and they healed, and with spade, and with pen, in Latin and in English, in reading, and in writing, and in all sorts of simple crafts, the monks taught *laborare est orare*. They made this the lesson of life. And though the constant fighting left such scant leisure for lessons of any sort, a little of it all the English did learn from them. And something too of the old connection in commerce and in learning was once again set up between Britain and the Continent by means of the monks, who were often travelling to and fro on some helpful errand of good works. Even in war-time, the fierce war-lords would

nearly always give safe conduct to the "holy men," and would spare the houses and the lands of the good monks and nuns. Still, with all help of the monks and the monasteries, and the pauses of peace that did come just now and then, with it all, the life of our countrymen at that period in our history, must have been truly, as an old writer expresses it, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Neptune, Roman god of the sea.

laborare est orare, Latin for "To labour is to pray"; work is prayer.

CHAPTER XIV

ALFRED'S ENGLAND

ALFRED'S rule was by-and-bye to make a glad change in all this sad state of things in our history. He came to the throne when he was twenty-two years old, and his reign lasted thirty years, and Alfred's reign was in truth what Tennyson tells us King Arthur meant his to be, "the fair beginning of a time." King Alfred had all the ideals of the legendary King Arthur, and he had the real opportunities of a real king for putting his ideals into practice. In other older and yet more beautiful words than Tennyson's, "He lifted up a standard for his people." Against heathen hordes on the battlefield and against pirates on the sea, he held the standard high. And, in the words of the Book again, King Alfred "prepared the way." He made the rough

soil of England smooth and ready for law and learning to strike root. He put right in the place of might, and in his *Dooms*, as his collection of laws is called, he went straight to the Bible for inspiration. Wherever he found any good law he took it and adapted it, and here he showed his true English feeling and sturdy common sense, for brand-new theories of government rarely fit into practical needs, and however good new rules might be in themselves, they might not have suited the ways of his subjects. Most strong growths are slow growths, and this is especially true of English constitutional law. Alfred searched in all the good law collections he could find, and out of the good he chose the best. At the very beginning of his code the king put the Ten Commandments, with the note: "These are the laws spoken to Moses by the Almighty God Himself." Then at the head of all the new rules that follow, is the old one, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." After this sort of preface, there came the practical, legal, everyday "dooms," which are a wise and careful selec-

tion from all the best laws in existence at that date.

Besides this law work and besides his fighting work Alfred found time for much general study, though he was always more a translator and a commentator of books than an original author. And this also must be counted to his credit. It was due to his modest and unselfish desire to enlarge his subjects' knowledge of the best literature that there was, and at that time there was very little indeed in their own language. And his choice of books to translate was always excellently suited to his country's needs. For himself, for his own pleasure, he was all his life a student. "Like a most productive bee," Asser says, "he flew here and there, asking questions as he went . . . collecting honey from many flowers . . . with which he thickly stored the cells of his mind." From the time he was a boy he kept a note-book for his own use, and at first only the psalms and prayers and scriptural quotations were written in it, but one day, Asser tells us, when he and his royal pupil were reading together, Alfred was greatly

impressed by a beautiful passage. And "are you willing," said the tutor, "that I should write that out for you on some page apart?" "Your plan is good," Alfred answered; and "from that time," continues Asser, "we daily talked together and found out other quotations which pleased him, and gradually the sheet became full," and that was the beginning of a very valuable collection of note-books which the king possessed. Alfred had a real and a great love for learning, and he made a very sensible beginning at making his subjects love it too, by always showing the greatest respect and honour to learned men. Scholars were made most welcome at Court, but Asser, Bishop of St David's in Wales, is the one whom we know most about, for he wrote the life of the king. Asser had every opportunity, for all through his student days, which lasted just all the days that he lived, Alfred sought Asser's help both in learning Latin and in enlarging his knowledge of English.

We shall read about it all, as we read the story of this great king, but perhaps we ought first to be sure that we understand a little what King of Eng-

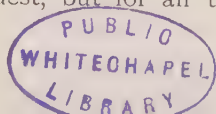
land meant a thousand years ago. The king was not then, as he is now, the constitutional head of all classes of people in a settled kingdom; he was the actual fighting head of one class, the great fighting nobles, or aldermen of the counties, as was their title. And besides this class of subjects, there was really only one other class — the small fighting men, who were followers or retainers of these big ones. These, the "serfs," tilled the soil, and they generally went with it when by conquest or by barter the land changed owners. Even if "freemen," the serfs were equally bound by law and by custom to follow their over-lord and to obey him. Of what sort this obedience might be, what heights or depths it might reach in practice, would greatly depend on what happened to be the character of the supreme fighting power who was at the head of them all. The character of the king, whether he was a wise man, or a weak or a wicked one, would make an immense difference in the kind and in the quantity of the quarrels of the great nobles, in all of which, just or unjust,

their retainers were forced to take part. There were no law courts in those days, and there was no police : the people's only chance for safety from every sort of violence and wrong lay in the "king's peace," as it was called, which meant certain days and certain occasions when no fighting was allowed. In our days, if our dear Queen Victoria had not been good, some of her subjects, it is likely, might have been less good for the lack of her beautiful example, but to their lives and their liberties and their comforts, her character could have made no difference at all. Life and liberty and well-being would have been in no more and in no less of danger to any one of us. But in those days all these things depended on the character of the ruler. The king was the active power for good and for evil living, and everybody's peace was concerned in the king's peace. If the people were to have any sort of assurance against every sort of ill, the king must be strong and the king must be just. Alfred was both, and the good fights that he fought and the good ships that he manned against the Danes, were not, we

shall see, the best of the good deeds that he did for England. He beat back the Danes, and he made the fierce war-lords fight for the first time from love of country, and not each one from love of his own especial bit of it, or from greed of his neighbours' bit, or for the gratification of a covetous desire. He made his nobles see that there is a nobility of service as well as of descent, and this grand new principle he put into practice and he put into law. So put, it was the beginning, and only one of the many good beginnings King Alfred made, of an entire change in the social life of England. There were no longer to be only two classes—the *thanes*, who owned the land, and the *serfs*, who tilled it. It was made possible for any one, labourer or trader, who through his industry or his enterprise throve enough to buy a certain small quantity of land, to become its responsible and independent owner, with the full rights and the full rank of a thane. Thus the noble *caste* was at once broken up and extended. Instead of retainers, there came to be an ever larger number of landowners of varying ranks, from big farmers to

small yeomen, and each one of them with the dignity of a definite personal and public obligation to the land he lived on. When such men as these followed an over-lord to battle, it would be not as "dumb, driven cattle," but as "heroes in the strife," or, at the very least, as brave volunteers.

And thus it came to pass that in this as well as in other ways which we shall see, the great king so knit his people together, that although the Danes came back again, and although a century after Alfred's death Canute the Dane was sitting on the throne of Alfred, yet by then the country was so filled and fired with the very spirit of the good, wise English ruler, that the Danish kings who came to govern England, governed it as Englishmen and not as Danes. And as the Englishmen, moreover, that Alfred's example had taught them to be — God-fearing, law-abiding, and loving fair fight and fair play. Canute and Harold were Danish kings, and the Danes conquered England. And in 1066 there was a Norman Conquest, but for all that the Anglo-



Saxons never became Danes or Normans. The Northmen only added their daring, and the Normans only added their charm, to the general stock of island character which the Roman had disciplined, and the Teuton had enriched. The inspiration of Alfred entered into the invaders as it entered into the natives, and under its beautiful influence the Danes were content to cast off such heathen ways of thought as were unworthy of the *dooms* and the doings of the good great king. How it all got done we shall see as we read Alfred's story, if we at all come to understand thereby what sort of boy and man Alfred was. For this is certain, that what any one of us does depends almost altogether on what any one of us *is*. Not of course the quantity of our doings, that must depend on a thousand outside circumstances, but the quality of them, that something which makes each one of us in his degree of value and of use, that is the result of character and not of condition.

constitutional, bound by fixed rules or laws.

CHAPTER XV

ALFRED THE PRINCE

IT was in the year 849, at Wantage in Berkshire, that Alfred was born. The Court moved from one royal residence to another in those days, as it does in these, although the royal residences then were of course of a very much simpler sort. There was little of state, and still less of comfort, in any of the palace arrangements. So the new baby shared with his older brothers and sisters in the rough and ready neglect which was the general fashion for training children in those times. Even the upbringing of a prince meant very little instruction save in out-door sports and warlike games. But there is a wise saying in an old book that "He is happy whom his mother teacheth," and the children of King Ethelwulf of Wessex would

certainly seem to have had this happiness. Queen Osburgha, Alfred's mother, was the same sort of delightful woman as Aurelia, the mother of Julius Cæsar. Osburgha was a friend and companion in her nursery; she tried hard to make her boys and her one girl consider their place, and their opportunities, see things largely, and see them whole, and not think that to eat, and to drink, and to fight, and to play was all that they had to do, or was worthy of nice children, much less of princes and princesses! Especially she wanted them to learn to read and to love books, and books were rare, and readers even rarer, we must remember, a thousand years ago. One day when all her children were with her, little Alfred and three or four big elder brothers, Osburgha showed them a beautiful book, or missal, as it was called. It was a collection of ballads, written in Anglo-Saxon—there were of course no printed books in those days—and the capital letters were painted with patient care in designs of many colours. The royal children all looked at the book admiringly, but rather, it is to be feared,

with the same sort of admiration as they would have looked at a new toy, and with a little less perhaps than they would have bestowed on a new game. Then the queen said, "The one among you children who can first read this book shall have it." The big ones did not look very eager, but little Alfred said, "Will you really give it for his very own to the one of us who learns it quickest?" and the mother said, "Yes, dear." Then the prince ran off to his tutor—though there were so few luxuries in the palace, there was a tutor—and very soon indeed, with his help, Alfred was able to read these ballads, or as some chroniclers say, to learn them by heart. Asser was the tutor, and it is Asser who tells us the pretty story of how Alfred ran off to his mother, and of how delighted Queen Osburgha was to give her bright little son the beautiful book—his first prize. All his life long Alfred loved books, and he always loved them in the right generous way, for the good that is in them, and not only for the good that is to be got out of them. To "read" is a quite different thing from to "read up."

We get another glimpse of Alfred as a very little boy at his sister Elswitha's wedding. This princess married a king of Mercia in 853, and though the chroniclers on whom we have to depend do not always quite agree with each other about dates, it cannot have been very long after this wedding that the sweet queen-mother died, and that King Ethelwulf, seeking distraction from his grief, set out on a long journey. He was sad, and perhaps a little indolent, and certainly religious-minded, so he thought he would go to Rome, which was the headquarters of the Church, and he would leave all the big brothers at home and take only this youngest little motherless son of his with him. Some writers say that there were two visits to Rome, and an interval of two years between, but however that may be, the widowed king and the bright little orphan prince did set off, and were guests of the Pope at Rome, and on their way back, of the Frankish king, Charles the Bald, at Worms. These two Courts were the most polished, at that time, in Europe, and were meeting-places for the leading statesmen and

the most brilliant scholars of the day. The little prince was probably petted and noticed a good deal by the grown-up people, and we may be sure that without any actual lessons, the sights and the sounds on this journey must have made a very important part of his education. On the way back from Rome, at the Court of Charles the Bald, the royal widower fell in love with the French king's very young daughter Judith, and a stepmother came home with King Ethelwulf and Prince Alfred. The elder brothers did not like the marriage at all, and for a little while there was even risk of civil war. But King Ethelwulf gave up part of his kingdom as a sort of peace-offering to his sons, and thus matters were settled without fighting. After Ethelwulf's death, what seems to us a very extraordinary marriage took place—his widow, Queen Judith, married Ethelbald, his eldest son. Ethelbald, her stepson and husband, died in 860, and then Judith went back to her own people, and there she married yet once again. And in after days a son of hers married a daughter who was by-and-bye born to King Alfred. Matilda,

wife of Henry I., was one of the descendants of this Judith and of her third husband, Baldwin, of Flanders, and thus we see that the kings of England, since the Norman Conquest, are of the direct line of Alfred the Great.

missal, an illuminated manuscript.

ballad, a poem about heroes to be sung or recited.

CHAPTER XVI

ALFRED AS HEIR-APPARENT

AFTER the death of Ethelbald in 860, his next brother, Ethelbert, wore the crown of Wessex. His reign too was short, and in 866 Ethelred, the third brother, became king, and Alfred, the youngest of Ethelwulf's sons, now seventeen years old, by his father's will stood as the next in succession. From the days when he had been the most eager to read, and the most persevering in learning to read, their mother's prize-book, Alfred had been looked on, by those who were privileged to look, as the most promising of all the sons of Ethelwulf. And the king in his will had shown that he shared this opinion by putting this youngest son of his in the direct line of heirship to the throne, to the exclusion of any possible sons that the elder brothers might have had. The reigns of all

these three elder sons, as we have seen, were short and quite ineffective as regards the making of England or the undoing of the Danes. Ethelbald, who came to the crown on his father's death in 858, was selfish and masterful; and of Ethelbert, who came next, we hear very little, either whilst he was under-king of Kent, or for the short time of his rule over Wessex. Ethelred succeeded him in 866, and he died from wounds received on the battlefield in 871. Of these three princes it is Ethelred whom we seem to know best, for him we see by light of Alfred, who for those five years stood loyally beside the throne in the always difficult position of heir-apparent. And then it was a particularly difficult position. It meant fighting as well as waiting; it was self in the front and self in the background at one and the same time. Alfred was equal to the call, and the weak but well-meaning Ethelred found in this younger brother of his the support both he and his country needed against the ever-increasing danger from the Danes. And by this date the danger had

grown to terrible proportions. "Cunning as foxes and fierce as wolves," the old chroniclers call these Northmen, and nearly every part of our islands could have added its own especial experience as to the truth of the description. Mercia and Northumbria were practically in possession of these fierce heathens, and their conquest of East Anglia in 869 was completed by making a target for their arrows of the English king who was reigning there, and who would neither acknowledge their sway nor give up his faith at their bidding. Edmund was the name of that king, and Bury St Edmunds is the name of the place which keeps unto this day the record of his martyrdom. Wessex remained uninvaded for a while, and thus was able to give what help it could in men and in counsel to the other divisions of the country, and especially to Mercia, whose king we remember was married to Alfred's sister, the only daughter of Ethelwulf and Osburgha.

But the peace of Wessex was soon to be broken up. In the first month of the year 871, some Danish ships came sailing up the

River Thames, and some Danish vikings came marching through Mercia over the Berkshire downs, by way of Reading. Reading was not then at all like the big, important town it is now, but it was very important in its own different way as the frontier fort to Wessex. And when the Danes seized this stronghold, the situation became very serious indeed for the Anglo-Saxon rule in England. It was in great force that they invaded Wessex; two or three of their kings led them, and at the first fierce onslaught the English were driven back. But it was not till a few days after that the decisive battle of the campaign was fought. On the plain called Ashdown, from which one gets a glimpse of Alfred's birthplace, Wantage, both forces were drawn up. As the Danes in their battle array moved nearer towards the English camp, King Ethelred was in his tent at early Mass. "And first I will serve God," said the king, and he would not stir from his knees, nor let the service be interrupted. Alfred was less devout and more practical. Without arguing with the king or waiting for him, he led

his soldiers swiftly up the hill, shoulder to shoulder, with their shields close against each other, so as to resist the Danish arrows. And thus, "his heart trusting in God," as Asser tells us, he made a rush "like a wild boar" on the enemy. The Danes gave way, and by the time Ethelred had come up with his men, the victory was already decisively turning to the English. The enemy were completely routed, a defeat due, this same chronicler is careful to impress upon us, as much to Ethelred's prayers as to Alfred's valour. A peace was presently patched up with the Danes, some say purchased from them, but at any rate after this encounter at Ashdown, the invaders had to leave Wessex altogether alone for the next few years. But London was still, we must remember, the Danish headquarters, and all the North-East of England was theirs, and the Danish king, Guthrum, was casting his covetous eyes on Cambridge in the Midlands, and making plans for winter settlements in the beautiful western counties of our England.

vikings, Northern sea-lords, sailors.

CHAPTER XVII

ALFRED THE KING

ETHELRED died in the April of the year of that famous Ashdown encounter, and Alfred, with the unspoken consent of the Witan, succeeded to the throne. The Witan, or council of wise men, was the consulting assembly of law-givers; the sort of seed which by English fashion of sowing has come in the centuries to our far-off harvest of parliament. Though as a rule the Witan met on the death of a king to elect formally the new one, there is no record of any such meeting on Alfred's succession. Ethelwulf had, as we know, in his will bequeathed the crown of Wessex in strict order of succession to the three brothers who were his sons, to the exclusion of any sons whom either of the elder ones

might have. Soon after Ethelred's accession, the wise men had met and had debated whether there should be any formal division of power or of property between Ethelred and Alfred. But neither brother wished it, and neither feared any rivalry or friction from the other. They quite agreed that Ethelred should reign all his life, and that Alfred was his sole heir.

At the time of his accession, Alfred was only twenty-two years old and he was already two years married. History tells us scarce anything of Queen Elswitha save her pretty name. There is a legend indeed that she was an earl's daughter, and that she tended Alfred once when he lay wounded, and not knowing his name nor his rank, fell straightway in love with him. But there seems no foundation at all for the romantic story, and history is silent, and tradition untrustworthy, concerning the wooing of Elswitha. But history tells us a very great deal concerning her royal husband and her royal children, and this knowledge should suffice for thoughtful people to make for themselves a very fair and perfect

picture of the slightly sketched queen. Once upon a time, and it was in these later times, a poet sang a lady into undying fame by simply describing her, not in her own name, nor by her own attributes, but, as "Sydney's sister, Pembroke's mother." That seems to some of us a very beautiful way for a woman to earn remembrance, as the mother and the sister of heroes. "If men are to be great and good," says a modern writer, "women must first learn what greatness and goodness are." It is a very profound saying, and Aurelia of Rome, and Osburgha and Elswitha of Saxon England, point and illustrate the saying. All three are very fine instances of a very fine and old-fashioned type of womanhood ; the sort of women who are content to live in the lives of others, and to be not doers, nor speakers, but influences. Life must have been such an entirely different thing for King Alfred with Elswitha from what it was for King Arthur with Guinevere, that one is very glad to recollect that Alfred is a king in history and Arthur a king in legend ! We have the full confirmation of dates, dates on which, within a year or two,

ancient chroniclers and modern writers agree, to make us happily sure that Alfred was married in 869 to this fair Saxon princess, and that he lived to see all their children grow up brave and loving, and to know that he "could command his sons and his household after him, to keep the ways of the Lord." There were five children of this happy marriage. Edward, the eldest, was the king's valiant son and successor, who fought by his side, and Ethelward, the youngest, was a scholarly prince who took the keenest interest in all his father's activities as a statesman. And there were three princesses in the palace, to help parents to be happy and brothers to be good. One, when she was old enough to choose her vocation, became an abbess, and the other two married. And the two sons-in-law added yet other happiness to the beautiful home-life of the great king. Earl Ethelred of Mercia was the husband of the eldest daughter, Ethelflida, and he became the staunchest of allies to King Alfred in his campaigns against the Danes, and Ethelflida, whom men called the Lady of Mercia, was a right loyal wife and valiant

princess, and stoutly held many a fort against the enemy in her own fair person, with her bright hair tucked away under her helmet. Thus, though we hear so little concerning the queen-mother, we may be quite sure that very much of what her husband did, and very much of what their children were, was due to her. And especially does this seem so, when we know that from his twentieth year till he died at fifty-three, the king suffered from frequent severe attacks of painful illness. "An example of the devil's eternal grudge against the good" is the description one old chronicler quaintly gives of the disease to which the king was subject, but we have more exact and more medical particulars of it given to us here and there. Some say the attacks were feverish, and some say they were epileptic in their nature. But whatever may have been the exact form that this chronic illness took, there is no doubt at all that Elswitha helped the king to bear his trouble in the brave and uncomplaining way which we know he did. "Lerne zu leiden ohne zu klagen," learn to suffer without complaint, was the fine saying—

and the finer doing—of Frederic, the German Emperor, who married our English Princess Royal; and Alfred, a thousand years before, lived in the spirit of this creed. He conquered his pain and his impatience of pain, instead of letting such worries conquer him, and this we shall see quite plainly as we follow the story of his thirty years of kingship.

witan, parliament.

epileptic, subject to fits.

CHAPTER XVIII

WITH SWORD AND SCEPTRE

So Alfred came to his kingdom but to find it slipping away from him, and to know that the whole country was in the gravest peril of becoming an outlying part of the empire of the heathen. Asser tells us plainly that the young king did not "greatly desire" the new and undivided power which by the death of Ethelred had come to him thus early. Perhaps, like the prophet of old, Alfred was a little distrustful of himself. Still, it is recorded, "he felt that it was the work he was commanded to do," and therefore he did not really hesitate about doing it. But it seems rather in the spirit of a sacred trust than in that of a glad possession that he took the sceptre as well as the sword into his hand.

The surrender of the Danes at Ashdown had resulted in a three years' truce for Wessex, but by land or by sea the king felt certain that the invaders would come again. The coast line was mostly undefended, and the road from Northumbria lay pretty open to them. The fighting help that Mercia might have given to Wessex, and which in the days to come she did render, was now withheld, for Burhred, the King of Mercia, Alfred's brother-in-law, tired and disheartened by the long strife, had gone to Rome to die. In his place, the conquering Danes had set up a "certain foolish man" whom they could use as a tool. And this shows us their craft as well as their daring, for if they had put one of their own Danish earls on the throne of Mercia, he would have been feared and fought by the natives as a foe, but a weak English under-king, the Danes thought, they might use for their own purposes, quietly to further their plans of settlement. "Like locusts," says the old chronicler, "the Danes spread over the country;" still for Wessex there was the truce which had been promised

or perhaps purchased, and the king used this respite in preparing a new line of defence. He thought of the "water walls" of his England, and in these three years Alfred made the small beginning of an English navy. He designed a better sort of boat than was then in use, and he planned how the boats should be manned, and where they should be placed. He had to bring men from abroad to build them, and even some foreign sailors to help man them, and both now and later on he had the worry which besets all eager and ardent souls in their work—he could not do everything himself, and of the workmen whom he employed, some did their work badly, and some did it slowly, and some not at all. And when it was all done, the "ships" were not many and the "ships" were not big. It was a tiny little fleet altogether, but nevertheless in the English chronicle it is recorded how "that summer King Alfred went out to sea with a fleet, and fought against the forces of seven ships, and one of them he took and the rest he put to flight." It was a small beginning,

but "well begun is half done," and Alfred's conviction of England's need to be supreme upon the sea, his idea of a navy as her first line of defence, was a beginning in the right way, a thought destined to be worked out 650 years later to the routing of the Spanish Armada. But to this assured safety of "Neptune's Park," there was yet a long meanwhile. Through all the first years of Alfred's reign the Danes seemed but to grow more daring. In the north of England, and in the west, and in the midlands they spread, plundering the monasteries, and burning the books, and destroying such small seeds of civilisation as had begun to take root in the land. A sort of terror and panic seemed at last to come upon the natives, and whole districts made no resistance at all to the fierce heathens. "Most of the people submitted to them," says one chronicler. King Alfred would not submit; but nevertheless when, in the midwinter of 878, a host, defiant of treaties and pledges, made its way into Wessex, seized Chippenham, and, in the quaint words of the

old chronicler, "sat down there," King Alfred had to retreat. With his family and a few followers, he rode away into the woods and fastnesses of the moors.

CHAPTER XIX

WITH SWORD AND SHIELD

IT was in the woods of Somerset that Alfred found his retreat and fortified it. Where two rivulets, the Parret and the Tone, meet, there is a bit of rising ground, a sort of rush-grown little island called Athelney, and about this small stronghold among the reeds all sorts of legends have gathered. But it is as history we know that very speedily out of a hiding-place Athelney grew into a camp and then into a fortress, and one actual and visible relic of those days has come down to us which we may look at in its honoured place in a museum at Oxford. This is the Alfred Jewel, which was found in 1693, close to where the fortress of Athelney stood. It is an ornament two or three inches long with some beautiful gold and enamel work, and

"Alfred had me made" is inscribed on it in old English. It may have been a bit of Alfred's sceptre, or have formed part of a more everyday jewel; it may be a relic of the hiding time, or of some few years later, when the king, with grateful leisure, built a monastery and a school on the site of his camp. Certainly, in those Somerset woods the actual sceptre, it seems to us, must have been laid aside. Alfred had to think for his people as well as to govern them, and to plan against those daring Danes as well as to fight them, and there could have been little opportunity for State trappings and outward signs of royal authority. It was one day, when the king was thinking very hard indeed, that the pretty, well-known tale of the burning of the cakes is told of him. He was resting a while in a cowherd's hut on the moors, and in the silent soldier who sat mending his bow and arrows before the fire, the cowherd's wife did not recognise the king. Her freshly-made cakes were having their share, too, of the warmth at the hearth, and curtly she bade her unknown guest keep his eye on them, and



ALFRED JEWEL.

(In the British Museum.)

give them a turn when one side was done. But Alfred went on thinking, perhaps he hardly heard her speak, or it seems pretty certain that his quick sympathy would have made him understand that her cakes were as much to her as his kingdom was to him. One feels sure that it was not on purpose, not just from not caring, that Alfred gave no thought to those cakes and that there they were all burnt to a cinder, when the good wife bustled back again. Her very natural scolding has come down to us in verse form, as well as in sober prose:—

“ You saw the cakes burn,
But gave them no turn,
Yet for the hot dish
You'd not fail to wish ! ”

This is how we may translate the old chronicler's Latin record of her wrath and sarcasm. But whether she did drop into poetry, or, as other chroniclers say, to the horror of her husband, did actually box the ears of this guest, whom he knew to be the king, we must be content to leave uncertain. Traditions gather like moss round the old stones of history. There is many

a story told too of visions and of voices, and of mysterious meals that came to Alfred in this waiting time, stories of angels disguised as pilgrims who brought him now food, and now followers, and tales told of dream voices and of silvery sounds of trumpets in the air, which bade him be strong and of good courage. And underlying all the pretty fables, there is doubtless the real and true truth, that

“Tasks in hours of insight will’d,
Can be through hours of gloom fulfill’d.”

Alfred was strong and of good courage because he believed in God and because he never despaired, and never grumbled; he knew how to labour, and he knew how to wait; and as a fact, the end of this Somerset defeat was the beginning of the first real conquest over the Danes. Alfred had time in this retreat of his to plan, and opportunity to find out by scouts, and without fighting, the actual weakness and strength of the enemy. In these quiet weeks he could think out defence and he could think out attack. Presently the news of some success-

ful skirmishing in Devonshire was brought to Alfred, and then, his men drilled and eager, the king thought that he might safely risk a battle in the open. So he marched out over Sedgmoor, and at Ethandune, near Trowbridge, a great fight was fought. The result was a quite decisive victory for the English, and now the tide of fortune turned in a remarkably quick and almost unexpected way. That paralysing terror of the Danes which had seemed for a little while to spread over the country and to lie on it like the mist on its hills, like mist disappeared. At Ethandune the Danes were so entirely routed that they sued for peace, and showed that they were in earnest about it by offering that their king, Guthrum, should give up his heathendom and become a Christian. Guthrum took the name of Athelstan, and King Alfred stood godfather to him, and thirty of Guthrum's followers were baptised at the same time. The Danish surrender was complete. The terms of peace were duly drawn up, and the Witan was summoned to ratify the treaty, which was called the Treaty of Wedmore.

CHAPTER XX

WITH SWORD AND SCROLL

ALFRED was as wise as he was brave ; many a successful warrior-king, flushed with a success which in its suddenness and completeness must have been almost intoxicating, would have used his victory to insist upon hard terms. Alfred was wiser ; he knew that his England needed leisure to grow great, and that the slow harvests which peace would bring would be better for her than the quick reapings of conquest. He would not drive the Danes to desperation. Instead of working for "glory," and following up his victory by chasing the enemy out of Britain, he determined to seek peace and pursue it, and not strive to extend his dominion, till he could make sure that the greater and the wider his dominion grew the greater and the wider would

be its blessing to those under his rule ; he would get the peaceful time to make his England worthy to be great. So Alfred's distinct policy was to make friends of his enemies. He let the Danes keep East Anglia and some other parts of the kingdom, and he trusted to the effects of climate and of conversion to make them gradually more of Englishmen and less of Danes. The converted king Guthrum of East Anglia became a neighbour and an ally ; and to Mercia, where Alfred's loyal son-in-law, Ethelred, reigned, he granted a special Witan of its own, in the hope that future rivalry between the states might be a rivalry in oratory and law-making rather than in rapine and lawlessness.

Of course the victory at Ethandune did not mean that the Danes were done with and that the fighting days were all over ; but it was no longer, nor ever again for England, a fight for life, neither for the national life nor for those things which make the life of a nation worth the living. And meanwhile Alfred had leisure, and grandly he employed it. By 886 the rebuilding of London was begun. No sooner

was it won back from the Danes than Alfred marked his pious gratitude, and some say fulfilled a pious vow, by despatching an embassy laden with rich gifts all the way to India, where there existed at this early date a struggling Christian settlement. But indulgence in this distant sentiment did not make the king the least less mindful of the near claims which the happy regaining of the capital made on his attention. He had the wit to see how many natural advantages London has to be the capital of an Island Empire, despite the desolate state to which the war had reduced it. He sent at once to the Continent for skilled foreign workmen, and he got them to use stone instead of wood for building materials, and he tried not to be impatient when the wood which he had taken out of their hands seemed now and again to get into their heads. "Owing to the sluggishness of the people," Asser tells us, "the admonitions of the king were often not fulfilled . . . or begun late . . . or never finished." Still London did get rebuilt, and by degrees more ships and some forts, and pleasant dwelling-houses besides ;

and walls too were repaired, and presently over all the land an abiding "folk peace" began to take the place of the old capricious "king's-peace." The Court moved from one part of the country to another, but resided chiefly at Winchester (the Camelot of King Arthur's legendary times), and here a school was attached to the Court, which the king's children attended, and of the half of the royal revenue which was set aside for the service of God, a portion, Asser tells us, was assigned to this Winchester foundation. And throughout all the kingdom Courts of Law were set up in which the "Dooms" that the king had collected were carried out by judges whom he had first to teach to read the Laws and then to respect them. But so deep grew the happy people's gratitude for their new liberties that they all, as it were, became police to guard them. It is said that whilst Alfred reigned, a traveller might lose his purse and find it a month hence on the same spot, or a golden bracelet might be hung on a tree without fear of a passing thief to steal it. And though this perhaps is putting the state of things a little

poetically, it does undoubtedly mean, in sober prose, that a just king and a strong was ruling in the land. "He found the laws powerless and he gave them force," is the inscription on a statue of Alfred which stands at Wantage, and this phrase most accurately expresses the new state of things. It is wonderful how Alfred found time for it all, but that is just one of the wonders that all busy people seem always ready, in their degree, to show us, for it is mostly the idle folk who get into a breathless hurry. However we can see that the king gave himself the help of being punctual and methodical; he mapped out his time, and he invented a way to "tell the time." There were no watches then nor for centuries after, so Alfred just painted his candles with coloured rings at set spaces, and when the candle burnt down from circle to circle it was as informing to him as when our clocks chime out the hour. And lest a draught of air might hurry the game to a hasty and incorrect conclusion, the king perfected his ingenious plan by putting horn shields or lanterns on his candles for measuring time. In all directions this wise

king carried out the wise king's saying in the Bible—that for “everything there is its due season.” Alfred's time and his money were both portioned out by rule, and in all ways, public and private, and without fuss or friction, he put into practice what Alexander Pope put into poetry,—“Order is Heaven's first law.” The king arranged his army in such a way that there should be a reserve force as well as a fighting force, and only certain times in the year for active service, and he was beforehand with Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury) in seeing how important it is for all ranks of people to have holidays. He arranged that there should be holidays for all the hard-working folk, and settled as far as he could that the holidays should be profitably and pleasantly spent. The long truce with the Danes, which lasted till 893, gave the king time to make these reforms, and left him some leisure over for a little happy student work besides.

embassy, a collection of king's messengers.

capricious, resting on chance.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SWORD SHEATHED

PEACE lasted almost unbroken until 893, when some of the Danes came again fresh from their freebooting expeditions on the Continent, and Hasting, one of the most famous of the vikings, was in command. But the country was organised now for defence, and navy and army both were ready for the foe. And now too Alfred had the help of his brave son Edward, as well as of his daughter, the Lady of Mercia, and her loyal husband Ethelred. It was not long before the wife and the two sons of Hasting were taken prisoners by the English, and perhaps part of the victory over the enemy was won when the chivalrous king sent these prisoners back to their camp, free, and loaded with gifts

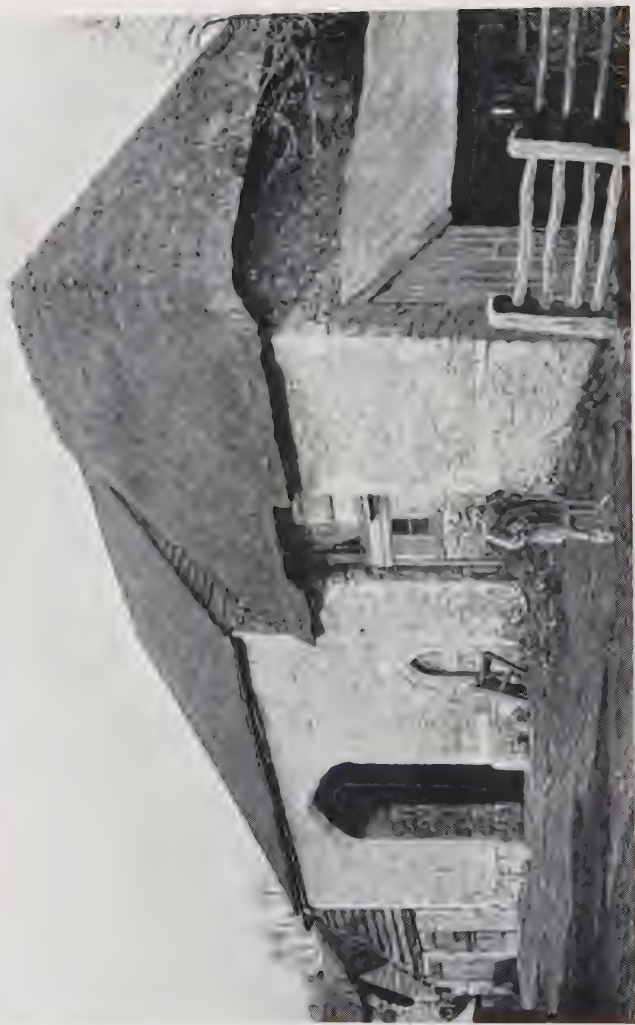


Photo: W. T. Green, Winchester.]

HYDE ABBEY.

instead of chains. At any rate by the spring of 896, the "great army" of the Danes was "broken up," and "thanks be to God," as the old chronicle expresses it, "it had not broken up the English race." And thenceforward, for the last four remaining years of the great king's life, there was peace in the land.

Happy nations, it is said, have no history, and certainly the chronicles of the very end of the ninth century that have come down to us are silent for that short space concerning the doings of the English people. A doubt even has come to some later historians as to whether the great king died in the October of the year 900 or of 901, and though we know that he was buried in Hyde Abbey in Winchester, yet, like the great prophet, "no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day."

But we know and have always known enough to be gladly certain that with King Alfred at the evening time it was light. There was peace in the land for those last few years of his reign, and we may imagine the king, not yet old, busy and content with his books and his family,

the cares of State so well-regulated that they had become a happy employment, and even, we may hope, the pain from which he suffered lulled by long use and patience into a burden lightly borne. But we must imagine it all, for no picture of that time, nor any at all of the king himself, has been preserved for us. But "I desire," King Alfred wrote, "to leave to the men who come after me a memorial in good works." And that memorial we have: and it is enough. The greatest gift, it has been said, that a hero can leave his race is to have been a hero. It is not what one does, but what one is, that counts in this "gift." Gordon, though he won no inch of territory for England, left her, in his legacy of disaster at Khartoum, a big, undying gift that makes for righteousness. And the more you read, if you read the right sort of books, the better you will understand this, and the more readily you will be able to recognise a hero, under any sort of disguise, or with any difference in time, or race, or condition, from Judas Maccabæus down to George Washington! And if you take King

Alfred as a standard, you will know in a minute the true hero from the make-believe one. You have to remember this: that the great king did ever the duty that lay close to his hand, and that he did the big things well because he did not neglect or despise the little things. He worked steadily, and he worked steadfastly, and in the humble, hopeful, fashion of a good wise man of old, who used to say, "It is not thy duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it." And many a good work did Alfred begin for England, leaving it for those who came after him to complete. In her navy, and in her army, in law, and in literature, in all of these things, Alfred made the "beginning" that is "hard." He lighted the lamp so that all men might see that "truly the light is sweet"; the daring of his enemies might try to put it out, or the stupidity of his friends might dull its brightness, or the pain of his own sufferings might cause it to flicker, but always Alfred held the lamp high, and always he kept it burning. And the light shone in the hearts of his countrymen, and

its rays reach us to-day, helping us to hand on undiminished our heritage of great deeds and great ideals, and the sweet memory of the king.

freebooting, piratical, robbing.





